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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on group counseling as a re-education and training effort for people who are abusive and violent. The analysis presented examines the effectiveness of one approach to this problem, in which a group format was adopted, fourteen 8-week group sessions were conducted, and a post-group survey was given to participants to obtain their perceptions of change. The article begins with a literature review focused primarily on group intervention strategies for working with abusers. Four group approaches (feminist, cognitive-behavioral, family systems, and integrative) are briefly summarized and related to group work. Following this review, the Domestic Violence Program is described, including a curriculum outline, a discussion of the group counseling format, and a description of the post-treatment survey. Results from the survey are reported and it is concluded that the program design and group format were successful for a majority of the participants. It is noted that relaxation, communication, "leaving the scene" (positive withdrawal), or using awareness and preventive techniques appeared to help participants exercise control over themselves. Suggestions for future research with the abuser population are offered. (NB)

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Short Term Group Counseling for Abusers: One Impact Study

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Abstract

Counseling groups with abusers can be effective, but many variables must be carefully considered: presenting violation, length of sessions, number of sessions, leadership style, content and format. This article examines several kinds of group interventions while focusing on one program to see what variables are essential for a minimum success rate.

Short Term Group Counseling for Abusers: One Impact Study

Domestic violence and family abuse inherently affect the fabric of contemporary life. Abuse and violence in homes are, therefore, interwoven with the dynamics of counseling and therapeutic intervention dealing with domestic problems. As such, domestic violence continues to be a subject of interest to both therapists and criminologists. The FBI estimates that 50% of American women are abused at some time in their lives by the men with whom they live (Breen, 1988). Victims of abuse in the counseling arena are seen in shelters for abused women (Dutton, 1988), in schools where children show signs of abuse, or through the criminal justice system (Gandolf, 1985).

This article focuses on group counseling as a re-education and training effort for people who are abusive and violent. This analysis examines the effectiveness of one approach to this pervasive problem. In this particular approach, a group format was adopted, fourteen eight-week groups were conducted, and a post-group survey was given to the participants to gather their perceptions of change.

Literature Review

In the last decade several books have been written about the characteristics of abusers and the effect of abuse on families (Gelles, 1987; Gelles & Strauss, 1988; Hutchings, 1988; Okun, 1986; Shupe, Stacey, & Hazlewood, 1987). Another series of recent books addresses social causes of domestic violence (Pleck, 1987; Strauss & Hotaling, 1980), while the most pertinent books for counselors working with batterers are those which focus on intervention (Bolton & Bolton, 1987; Caesar & Hamberger, 1989; Finkelhor, 1988; Shupe, Stacey, & Hazlewood, 1987; Sonkin, Martin, & Walker, 1985; Stets, 1988). Even though the resources are plentiful, the actual tactics for intervention vary widely. The strategy of intervention depends upon the definition of abuse, the court-referred or the voluntary status of the abuser, the setting of the intervention strategies, and whether the client was the abuser, the abused spouse, the abused child, or the abused elder.

The approaches to intervention can be categorized within several different theoretical perspectives. While analytical, psycho-dynamic and psycho-social approaches remain available for individuals, this article focuses primarily on group intervention strategies.

FOUR GROUP APPROACHES

Caesar and Hamberger (1989) cite four primary intervention strategies with group formats: feminist, cognitive-behavioral, family systems, and integrative. Each will be briefly summarized and related to group work.

Feminist

Central to the feminist intervention strategies are the issues of power and control. While sharing a social learning theory perspective with cognitive-behavioral and other approaches, the feminist view holds that effective intervention must include a gender role analysis which focuses on the power and control and what effect this has on the partner/victim. According to the feminist view, any treatment which does not have as its core an emphasis on gender disparity misses the mark (Adams, 1988). Without it, such treatment does not take into account what happens to many abusive men; that they adapt to stressful everyday situations without resorting to violence, only to go home to domestic stress and there resort to violence in order to maintain power and control. There are other elements of feminist intervention strategy, which are shared with other approaches while still retaining the unique perspective of the power and control differential in gender issues.

Cognitive-behavioral Interventions

The cognitive-behavioral approach stems from a loose aggregation of postulates which evolved from principles of learning theory as well as operant and classical conditioning. These concepts were first utilized by Bandura (1973) in addressing problems of aggression and then were unified into a model for intervention within a context of social learning theory.

The significance of cognitive-behavioral approaches in current practice is this unification of theories and procedures, especially in coping-skills training and problem solving (Saunders, 1987). Essential to cognitive behavioral approaches is contingency management. Controlling the immediate outcomes and consequences or contingencies is considered vital in decreasing the frequency of the undesirable behavior. Part of contingency management focuses on reinforcing behavior which is incompatible with the undesirable behavior--such as focusing on the positive opposite of the violent behavior.

Family Systems Interventions

Family systems proponents working with family violence describe the significance of familial behavior within the context of the family situation. This stems from the precept that family violence is likely perpetuated on an intergenerational basis and will continue to cycle if intervention is not successful. Further, the family approach takes into account this

"cycle of violence." Such a cycle emerged from social learning/behavioral perspectives and was principally set forward by Walker (1979, 1984) where she indicated that there were successive stages involving the buildup of tension, the expression of conflict, and then an emotional reconciliation. According to this view, both the perpetrator and the victim seem to be locked into a cycle unless intervention successfully breaks the chain of events. In addressing the cycle of violence, many family systems practitioners emphasize how it is an intergenerational problem: today's victim or victimizer was likely yesterday's victim as a child or previous partner.

The family system approach tends to minimize, to some degree, how people are individually diagnosed. Rather, it emphasizes that the cycle and the nature of the interactions affect the entire family. This cycle is further reinforced because the family is regarded as a system which is interwoven among the different members and is organized in such a way that the behavior and actions of one impacts other members of the family system. In most family systems perspectives, the initial emphasis is on change that focuses on content and problems. Then, once the threat of harm has been effectively managed, the family systems approach tends to delve into the relationship within the family.

INTEGRATIVE APPROACHES

Domestic violence impacts many different professional disciplines, and consequently, it garners many different definitions and approaches by which to deal with it. For most therapists and clinicians there is agreement that it is valuable to have a variety of approaches available. Domestic and family violence cuts across all ethnic, racial, religious, educational, and socioeconomic strata. Nevertheless, we continue to look for common variances in order to explain the sources and etiology of this phenomenon. Given the wide array of sources of violence, it could be safely argued that no one approach can universally be applied. Instead, since the cause of domestic and family violence is so varied, the approaches used to deal with these causes need to also be varied.

In summary, within each of these approaches to group formats lies variation and eclecticism, as well as the use and understanding of group dynamics. These theoretical and pragmatic approaches are utilized by American Corrective Counseling Services (Setty & Mealing, 1987). This model and other counseling approaches focus on the participant using self-awareness training, management of arousal and anger, use of time-out techniques, conflict resolution, and communication with an emphasis on assertive techniques.

A Domestic Violence Program

The Domestic Violence Program studied in this survey was comprised almost entirely of court referred men and women who were charged with violating the state's domestic violence law. Spouses or partners of the court-referred person were encouraged to attend voluntarily. In addition, a number of voluntary couples or individuals referred by community marriage counselors were included in the program.

The group size on any given night ranged from five to twenty participants with a mode of 9 participants. The groups had a fixed length of eight weeks so the participants knew in advance when the group would end. The fixed length was based on the work of Edleson and Syers (1989) at Minneapolis' Domestic Abuse Project, where research indicated that time-based groups had more success than open-ended groups. Additionally, these researchers found that in comparing structured didactics in groups for abusers versus open affective processing in those same groups, both approaches had inherent limitations, but neither the highly structured educational programs nor the minimally structured self-support groups were the most effective modality. Rather, they found the most effective intervention was a blend of educational approaches and self help. This blend of education and self help was chosen for the group format and focus of the domestic violence group studied in this paper.

Curriculum Outline

The theoretical underpinnings of the curriculum were cognitive-behavioral (Saunders, 1989), linked with feminist and social learning theory (Bandura, 1973). In addition to these conceptual frameworks, an emphasis on role play and behavioral rehearsal as well as social shaping through group interactions was chosen. The curriculum was designed to (1) take participants from a point of cognitive awareness of affective states to an experiential examination of their own states of feeling and a desire for change, and (2) to help participants learn and implement appropriate skills.

The skills ranged from simple relaxation and breathing techniques to timeout, active listening, stress reduction, and assertive communication. Role play and behavioral rehearsal, along with assigned *in vivo* homework, provided opportunity to practice the skills.

Once an indication of skill development was perceived, an emphasis on the personal value of non-violent behaviors was highlighted. This self assessment was undertaken within the group context and was done to promote not only self discovery, but also to encourage a values shift toward alternatives to violence. The rights and safety of victims were examined in light of the participants' own accountability and responsibility.

The program combined education and awareness elements within the context of relationship building, communication, and self

esteem. The overall goal was to integrate the skills by using the dynamics of the group within a supportive counseling format.

Group Counseling Format

The integration of the curriculum focused on the following significant intervention elements: 1) awareness, 2) desire for change, 3) education, and 4) modeling and practice. This was accomplished by confrontation of old behavior, teaching alternatives to violence, modeling new behaviors, role plays, and the availability of new opportunities to practice in the appropriate alternatives. Each of the elements will be described below.

The awareness aspect centered on furthering the participants' self acceptance and understanding of their behavior. This involved moving past denial in order to identify certain discrete behaviors which the abuser wanted to change. The second element was a desire for change. It was expected that without the abuser's acknowledgement of a need to find alternate patterns, there would be limited chance for behavioral change. This was especially true for court-referred abusers, most of whom had no experience with a supportive counseling environment. Once their initial resistance was overcome and the denial confronted, many abusers began to address their problems and might have never done so had they not been court ordered.

The educational element is highlighted for the participant within the group experience. This component consisted of

educating the abuser about the cycle of violence, the impact of family systems, behaviors, and appropriate behavioral alternatives.

The fourth element consistedf modeling the qualities of open mindedness and unconditional positive regard on the part of the counselor. It was expected that these attributes would enhance the chances that participants in the group would be receptive to considering the changes necessary. This element included role play of behavioral alternatives to violence.

Post-Treatment Survey

Surveys were sent to participants of the program in an attempt to determine if participants had been helped in their ability to relate to their significant others or spouse and whether the skills taught in the class were proving effective in deterring the violent behavior.

The two-page self-report confidential survey was to be completed and returned in an enclosed stamped envelope. A cover letter informed the recipient not to sign their name on the survey form as it was suspected that some individuals might return the cover letter with the survey. The letters were addressed "Dear Former Domestic Violence Class Member." Of the 50 surveys sent, 30 (60%) were returned completed. It is possible that court referred clients may be less likely to respond to surveys than other, non-coerced populations. Given the population addressed in this study, a 60% return rate is

considered to be a rate useful for study, and their positive response toward the group experience is evidence that those responding were positively impacted. It is also possible however, that respondees were more favorable toward the program than the non-respondees. The respondees, all male and all court referred, ranged in age from 20 to 69. During the program, 55% were married, 15% divorced, 10% married but separated, 5% single, and 5% living with a partner but not married (10% did not respond to this item). At the time the surveys were completed and returned 2 - 3 months after the completion of training, these figures did not vary.

When asked what factors respondees believed significantly contributed to the last abusive incident, 50% said that alcohol, drugs or money problems were involved. Other major factors contributing to the last abusive incident were unemployment (39%), physical aggression by partner (28%), job pressures (28%), conflicts about or with children (25%), conflicts about or with in-laws or other family members (25%), and jealousy (22%).

Outcomes

Respondents indicated that they were using the skills that they were taught in the group. Eighty-five percent indicated that they were using the relaxation skills, and 90% were using the communication skills they had learned, while 85% indicated that they were "leaving the scene" (practicing positive withdrawal) when they could not take it anymore, and 70% were

using awareness and preventative techniques to avoid violence. When asked how often they had been violent toward their partner since they left the program, 85% indicated that the abuse was less severe or nonexistent. When asked about verbal abuse, 75% of those responding indicated that the incidence of verbal abuse was less or nonexistent, 25% indicated that it was about the same. These anonymous reports of behavior from court-referred abusers indicate the importance of more long term follow up training and court involvement even after the intensive group work is over.

Comments were solicited to see what kind of impact the program had on the participants. Regarding the use of relaxation skills, one participant wrote: "They help me to deal better with life...they also make my breaks at work more rewarding." Typical responses about communication skills were: "They are helpful in all areas of life, not just with my wife," and "Leaving the scene when I can't take it anymore is an important idea but as of late this hasn't been necessary."

When asked if they thought the program could be improved, responses varied from discussion of how payments could be made easier, to keeping the group simple and sticking to the basics. Comments indicated that the group needed to be longer in duration and conducted more in depth. "I took the program twice and still wish I was going," one respondent stated. There was also concern that the group be open to everyone and cost less for people who

want help before they hurt somebody. "I wanted help before but couldn't afford it," one respondent wrote. The bulk of comments indicated satisfaction with the program and the respondees believed their behavior and thoughts about abusive behavior had changed.

DISCUSSION

It appears from the response that the program design and group format were successful for a majority of the participants. It seems apparent that the Group was able to offer an environment where skills to respond non-abusively could be learned.

Those factors which helped individuals exercise control over themselves were relaxation, communication, "leaving the scene" (or positive withdrawal), or using awareness and preventive techniques, appear to have given the clients new skills to use in their personal relationships. Judging from their comments, the individuals felt that using these skills was positively affecting their relationships, their jobs, and their lives.

One of the most important results of this study was the realization that even when participants are mandated to attend a group as a result of a socially stigmatized act, the participants can learn and feel positive about the skills that they have been taught. Additionally, there were indications of the cohesion that was felt within the groups by some members, even to the extent that one member wanted to have a postgroup session for accountability.

It is clear from the responses that the program is working for the majority of those who responded. The respondees are using the skills they learned, experiencing less abuse and expressing gratitude and happiness at having had the opportunity to participate in the groups. Perhaps this is a feasible alternative to fines and incarceration of abusers, and could potentially lower the incidence of abuse.

Further research for this population should include further study of the extent and role that alcohol played in the incidents of abuse. Further research could also be done to determine if, indeed, better results are achieved if the sessions are longer, or shorter, or last for a greater number of weeks. Additionally, perhaps adding more time and components to the group format for dealing with topics such as job pressures, money problems, or unemployment would be advisable. Through this process, the techniques of gathering data need to be improved as well. Dutton (1988) pointed out two particular short comings in surveys and interviews with abusers or assault victims: First, the descriptions could possibly be self-serving, and second, that semi-structured questionnaires or interviews may prove to be inadvertently cued by the interviewer. Therefore, the task of the group counselor and researcher is to develop a descriptive instrument which minimizes problems in the gathering of data.

SUMMARY

This study examined a specific group of abusers who completed an intervention strategy and for whom some measure of success was achieved. The group format seems to be a viable tool to heighten awareness of inappropriate conduct, facilitate a desire for change, educate in alternatives to violence, and practice new behaviors. Nevertheless, given the scope and magnitude of family/domestic violence, it is imperative that further outcome studies as well as programmatic treatment analysis be continued.

The impact of the community and criminal justice efforts must weigh significantly in predicting the chances that any perpetrator will respond to a particular kind of group intervention, and contain his/her violence. As Caeser and Hamberger (1989) stated, we need to restate the question: "Does the batterer treatment work?" to: "for whom does group treatment work and under what circumstances?"

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